EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday 16 June 2004
(*Morning*)

Session 2

£5.00

Produced and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by The Stationery Office Ltd.

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EDUCATION COMMITTEE
17th Meeting 2004, Session 2

CONVENER

*Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab)
*Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab)
*Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP)
Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP)
*Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con)
Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP)
Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Shirley Anderson (Scottish Executive Education Department)

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Brian Cooklin (Headteachers Association of Scotland)
Margaret Doran (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
Alex Easton (Headteachers Association of Scotland)
Michael O'Neill (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
Lindsay Roy (Headteachers Association of Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mark Roberts

ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Education Committee

Wednesday 16 June 2004

(*Morning*)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:46*]

Item in Private

The Convener (Robert Brown): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the 17th meeting of the Education Committee in 2004. We are meeting in public, as I always have to say at this point, so I ask everyone to ensure that their mobile phones and pagers are turned off.

Item 1 is consideration of whether to take item 5—consideration of the draft report on the child protection inquiry—in private. Can I have views on that?

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): We should take that item in private.

Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP): I disagree—we should discuss it in public.

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): I have no problem with discussing the child protection inquiry report in public, unless there are major objections to that.

The Convener: This is the usual discussion that we have on items in private; I confess that I find it difficult to find the right approach to it. There are some advantages to discussing draft reports in private. That has been my view from the beginning, although the discussions that we have had in public have gone reasonably well.

There is a divided view, so we will vote on the question. The proposal is that the report be discussed in private. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Convener: There will be a division.

FOR

Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)

AGAINST

Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)

The Convener: The result of the division is: For 4, Against 2, Abstentions 0.

Proposal agreed to.

Subordinate Legislation

St Mary's Music School (Aided Places) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2004 (SSI 2004/238)

Education (Assisted Places) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2004 (SSI 2004/239)

09:49

The Convener: Item 2 concerns subordinate legislation. The two sets of regulations that we will consider under this item have a familiar ring, because we dealt with them last year. We welcome Shirley Anderson from branch 2 of the Scottish Executive Education Department schools division to tell us what little there is to say about the regulations.

Shirley Anderson (Scottish Executive Education Department): Good morning. Basically, this is an annual event and we have all been here before. The regulations will uplift the rates for allowances in both schemes, which are means tested on parents' income. Therefore, the allowances in the regulations are set to ensure that parents do not pay a lot more than they have done in previous years for their children to attend independent schools through the assisted places scheme or the aided places scheme.

The Convener: The SSIs are subject to the negative procedure, so unless there are any strong objections, the committee should agree that it does not wish to make any recommendation in its report to the Parliament. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: I thank Shirley Anderson for her attendance this morning.

School Curriculum Inquiry

09:50

The Convener: We move on to the school curriculum. We have several witnesses.

On our first panel is Margaret Doran, the head of schools for Stirling Council, and Michael O'Neill, who is director of education for North Lanarkshire Council. They are here in their capacity as members of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland. Both witnesses want to say something to introduce the subject.

Michael O'Neill (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): I would like to make a brief statement on two separate aspects of the topic that is under discussion this morning. I will speak briefly about the curriculum and its flexibility, and Margaret Doran will go on from there to talk about core skills and inclusion. I will try to be brief, although it is a very complicated subject. I apologise for bringing documentation to the committee at such a late stage; I received late notification that I was coming here.

There are three aspects to reflect upon. The first is the drive for curriculum flexibility and the benefit that it is bringing to young people. The approach that was used was a bottom-up one. The documentation that I have brought dates back to 2001, before many local authorities and schools were pushing back the boundaries of the existing guidelines to seek more flexibility in order to benefit more pupils. We are pleased that during the past few years the Executive and the minister have seen fit to extend the flexibility that is available to authorities and schools, which allows them to provide more appropriate education. It is important to put the current debate in the context of the desire for flexibility's having been driven at grass-roots level by schools and local authorities.

There are two points to make that reflect why there was a desire for flexibility, although there are many areas on which I could focus. In the secondary curriculum there is what I have referred to in the past as the tyranny of the modes. Until not long ago pupils were, after the second year of the secondary curriculum, forced into eight modal areas of study. It did not really matter whether they had interest in, aptitude for or desire to study in those areas; they had to follow the previous guidelines and do it. That resulted in youngsters' ending up in areas of study in which they were not interested and in which they were doomed to fail, which also led to attendance and discipline problems.

Many authorities and schools have used the new flexibility to alter that situation. I have an example of that from my area. Back in 2001, we said to schools that it was no longer compulsory to follow all eight modal areas and that after pupils' second year, only English and maths were compulsory, but they should study six of the eight subject modes.

Why was that important? It was important because it offered three aspects that are now very prevalent in Scotland, which members will, I am sure, see in action during the visits that they are about to make. That change meant that youngsters could make more appropriate choices of subjects to study. If someone wanted to follow music, art and drama, they could do so. If they wanted to study three sciences, they could do so. If they did not want to pursue the social subjects, they could drop them. That meant that young people could follow their true interests and aptitudes. It was hoped that that would lead to increased attainment and achievement and that it would allow pupils to progress to further and higher education and other opportunities.

The second aspect meant that some young people no longer had to do eight subjects, but might instead do seven. The time that was freed up by that offered the possibility of an alternative curriculum that helped to give them life skills. There are many examples around the country of projects such as skill force, xl clubs, on track and projects that are run by Right Track, which encourage young people to remain in education and to achieve by taking one subject fewer.

The third and most crucial aspect for the future of Scottish education is that curriculum flexibility has offered the opportunity to introduce vocational opportunities into the third and fourth years in school, so that young people can opt to follow a curriculum—when it is made available to them—that includes not only French, English and science, but construction trades, hairdressing, beauty therapy, digital technology and so on. That allows schools to become genuinely comprehensive and reflects an ability to tackle a range of issues that relate to discipline, behaviour and the world of work. I am sure that the committee will see that in action in its visits to schools—certainly they will see it at Clyde Valley High School. Relaxation and curriculum flexibility in the modes have been and will be critical to delivering appropriate education.

The age-and-stage regulations are linked with curriculum flexibility and with the thorny topic of the perceived problem in secondary 1 and 2, about which I have—in a previous incarnation—talked to the committee. The view is that the problem lies not in learning and teaching, the content of the curriculum, the young people or the teachers, but in the structure and in the fact that second year is a waste of time for the vast majority of pupils.

The new age-and-stage regulations offer young people the opportunity after first year to go into the option choices that I spoke about, and to begin on a coherent pathway that leads to certification or a career. If young people follow standard grade courses in their second and third years, they can consider at the beginning of their fourth year two-year highers, vocational opportunities and a more coherent pathway forward. Schools can also timetable opportunities more appropriately with different numbers of pupils.

Curriculum flexibility, particularly in the two matters that I mentioned, offers genuine possibilities that are being used up and down the country to improve the quality of Scottish education. That is linked with core skills and inclusion, about which Margaret Doran will talk.

Margaret Doran (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): The curriculum as we understand it in Scotland—the knowledge and understanding, the skills and the attitudes—is defined in national curriculum guidelines for the nursery, primary and secondary sectors. It is also driven by the expectations of the examination system for national assessments in primary 3, 5 and 7 and S2 and for national qualifications, and by the expectations of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education and of local authority quality assurance arrangements, which are linked closely to HMIE expectations.

It could be argued that those are givens that do not require significant change. The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland would not support a curriculum review that imposed yet another set of curriculum guidelines. The curriculum and associated assessment regime have had enough change and require time to bed down and to focus on the quality of the learning and teaching experience. Teachers need to build up confidence in the secondary school curriculum in particular, and they need time to assimilate restructuring as part of the agreement in "A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century: Agreement reached following recommendations made in the McCrone Report".

However, a strong argument exists in favour of moving away from rigid adherence to curriculum planning specifications—that is, tick-box regimes of compliance with a curriculum that is defined by outcomes as summative assessment—towards more freedom for classroom leaders to take risks; to be more child centred and responsive to children's needs; to be more creative and innovative with timetabling in primary and secondary schools; and to be more creative in team teaching and in opportunities to work with other professionals to deliver a curriculum within and outwith the school day.

Teachers need time to develop further their capacity to use formative assessment by gathering evidence from oral, written and practical tasks so that they can provide quality feedback, praise and encouragement for success. They need time to collect meaningful evidence that will secure improvement in learning and teaching and which will allow the development of a range of learning and teaching methodologies to deliver a differentiated experience.

The system never stops developing and change is inevitable. Throughout the change agenda, education authorities have focused on learning and teaching, thinking skills, learning skills, emotional intelligence, embedding core skills and promoting creativity and innovation. At the same time, the examination system has reinvented itself, through national tests from five to 14 becoming national assessment from five to 14, through standard grades and highers becoming national qualifications and through the introduction of higher still.

10:00

Quite rightly, there is great emphasis on curriculum flexibility, but there should also be emphasis on curriculum coherence. To ensure that young people make sense of the curriculum, there should be connections between subject, specialism and experiences. Information technology is making a significant contribution in that regard. The virtual schoolbag provides safe opportunities for looked-after children to learn in school, at home, in internet cafes and anywhere else.

I note that the committee is seeking views on pupil choice. A question that we might ask is why we keep calling young people "pupils"—in each of the national priorities, children are referred to as "pupils". However, a pupil is a construct whereby a child is defined by their being in school, but that is only part of the child; indeed, it is 15 per cent of each year in their development. By defining children in that way, we do not look beyond the classroom to the life of the whole child and to their education, care and health needs; we set a ceiling on our understanding of how children learn, of how we support their development and of how factors that are external to the nursery or the school can impact on that development.

If each child is unique and his or her life circumstances are unique, each child will learn and develop differently. We learn best in social, personal and learning circumstances that recognise our uniqueness. The best teachers and schools recognise the uniqueness of each young person and they develop a thorough knowledge of the child and their life circumstances by listening to them and respecting their views. More and

more schools have established representative councils, in which children and young people are asked about the effectiveness of learning and teaching, about curriculum choice and about ways in which to improve the life of the school. Such schools are curious about children, about how they learn, about what supports or hinders them in doing so and about where, when and how they learn best. Further to that, they ensure that young people have opportunities to participate in decisions relating to their development. There is respect for the receiver of the services.

When we review the curriculum, we need to reflect on the purposes of schooling. Are we to continue to teach compartmental subjects or do we develop the capacity of every teacher to teach the whole child? How can schools contribute to a set of life skills that will ensure that all young people, now and when they leave school, achieve their full potential? There is a case for embedding a set of life skills in every classroom in the land and in ensuring that we develop young people's confidence and self-esteem. We need to ensure that they have transferable skills, that they can access knowledge, that they have a positive attitude to themselves and to others and that they have the resilience that will see them through life's challenges.

There is research evidence—collected by Helen Fraser and others in 2000—that teachers in Scotland are faced with a tension between the overall aim of raising average attainment and targeting of resources and support at children whose attainment levels are of most concern. The research found that teachers had difficulties in countering multiple deprivation in learning and in raising the overall quality of the learning environment. If our curriculum is to meet the needs of all children—and, indeed, if it is to meet a national and local authority moral imperative to meet the needs of the whole child—there should be designated time and opportunities for teachers to explore their attitudes and values. In Stirling, there is evidence that multi-agency working around the needs of vulnerable children presents many opportunities to explore professional values, especially in relation to the exclusion of young people from mainstream schools, where one service might claim that another service does not understand. The challenge for the Education Committee and the minister will be to ensure that the outcome of a curriculum review is based on developing a set of values and principles that can be shared and developed further with other professionals who are also delivering services to children and families.

Schools do not operate in isolation and traditional concepts of the curriculum have moved on: one size does not fit all. Establishments are not teaching the 30 per cent of the child that was taught the 1960s and 1970s; they are teaching 100 per cent of the child. We need to take account of the baggage that children take to school and not to focus solely on whether they take their schoolbags home. Therefore, when the committee asks what we need to do to motivate those who are turned off by the academic curriculum and to break down barriers between subject areas, the answer is that we need to ensure that every teacher has the opportunity to reflect on a set of principles and values that will ensure that the system is equipped to accommodate a more child-centred education system for the 21st century. Schools need to work in partnership with other providers in a problem-solving way.

A set of values is key to a new approach to whole-child development, but a set of values for the school curriculum cannot be developed by schools alone. It is clear that the values on the Scottish mace—compassion, wisdom, justice and integrity—are worthy of consideration as key values for all services for children and the curriculum. Each authority has a statement of its vision, values and aims, which is subject to consultation, and each school has a set of values and aims. However, as Bill Gatherer said at a recent conference on values, our national values should be a clear message to the wider community that says, "This is the way we're going to do things round here."

Strong messages cannot be centred on traditional concepts of the school as the sole contributor to children's development; values need to be developed in partnership with others. We should focus our vision, values and principles on the kind of childhood experiences that young people should have. Young people in Stirling who developed a children's charter said that they wanted their childhood to be safe and that they wanted a good education, good school buildings and good leisure and recreation facilities. They also wanted to have rights, responsibilities, respect, fun and the best time of their lives in all schools. All staff in schools and other services are committed to delivering on that charter. From the mouths of babes we hear about a vision and a set of values and principles that will influence a curriculum that goes beyond traditional subject barriers and departmentalism, and which is child centred and allows us to put children first in all that we do.

The Convener: Thank you. You talked about values and so on in education, and about the need to include the whole community beyond the school. I was struck by the fact that there is sometimes a discrepancy between what you said and what local authorities do, because they see the school as being the deliverer, and little or no account is taken of youth organisations or after-school clubs, which are often not regarded as

being part of the school community. Is that a fair criticism?

Margaret Doran: That is perhaps a wee bit outdated. Through the provision of integrated community schools, more and more schools have made best use of funding from the national excellence fund for schools and the national priorities action fund, and they have pulled together strands of funding for sports, arts and culture. In Stirling, there is an entitlement model that is based on clusters of schools, which means that every child has a basic entitlement to sport, arts and culture. We pull down funding for sports co-ordinators, active primary co-ordinators, youth support, sports development officers from community services and cultural co-ordinators. We interpret and make sense of a plethora of initiatives, so people can make best use of those resources to create broad opportunities for the children within and outwith the school day.

I was in New York in November, where I saw fantastic examples in Harlem of partnership working for disaffected young people, whereby arts and cultural businesses, such as New York City Ballet and New York Philharmonic, come together to contribute, because they feel they have a social responsibility to create opportunities for those young people outwith the school day. A lot of authorities are using a lot of imagination to pull together every possible resource to maximise support for children. However, we are not talking just about the school day or school year but about holidays.

The Convener: I want to follow up on what you said about demotivation. One of the big challenges, particularly in secondary schools, is to motivate children who are turned off by the traditional school experience. Are we getting better at that? What are the key issues in moulding the curriculum or the approach? What will help us to motivate children more effectively, especially those in the upper secondary school?

Michael O'Neill: We are getting better at that. In the past three or four years, schools have become better at motivating young people, thanks to there being more flexibility. There are a number of key aspects in that. One is that the curriculum that was on offer was not, for a number of young people, appropriate; they saw no connection between the curriculum and their life after school. We have to consider being truly comprehensive and offering young people opportunities. As I said, the potential to offer more vocational opportunities, which we have already seen in North Lanarkshire and many other areas, has allowed an improvement in the school ethos and in young people's behaviour, attendance and attitudes, because they now see a direct link between what they are doing in school and what they intend to do when they leave school. They see value and practicality in what they are doing.

I would not want to suggest that such an approach is about a return to a junior secondary model, because we must also offer opportunities that relate to the new vocations, whether in digital animation, digital technology, film making or media work. Those are vocations that were not offered in the past and which I would categorise as being vocational opportunities at the most able end, if you like. As Margaret Doran has said, one key to motivating young people is to make clearer to them the link between what they are doing in school and their future life; I mean not only the world of work, but lifelong learning and values, citizenship and other aspects of life. That is a key area.

The nature of learning, the teaching process and the fact that young people are now much more involved in an active learning process in schools also lead to their appreciating more what is happening. However, a clearer link between the school and post-school is the key in the upper secondary, whether in respect of the world of work, or in respect of sport, music, arts and culture, to which Margaret Doran referred. There should be a perception that people will, in their lives after school, carry on with activities such as lifelong learning that will tie into national issues about fitness, health, diet and lifestyles and will also link to citizenship in respect of turnouts at local and national elections, for example.

Margaret Doran: I had a meeting with secondary head teachers this week in which we shared information about children who are not accessing full-time education. Several years ago, we agreed with the heads that they would take responsibility for all the children in their areas. Perhaps there will be children who are in residential schools or who are in different provision in behaviour support services centrally, but are on the school's sleeping register. They need never have been to a mainstream school, but the school will know their name. We share information about the types of educational and care packages that the children have. Therefore, we know the children's names and we know about social work, health or education support and the organisations with which we must work to ensure that the child has an experience not just in the school day, but sometimes at weekends and in holiday times.

Through partnership working and through everybody taking responsibility for such children, packages can be created for them. There can be education packages with further education colleges or work experience opportunities. Sometimes, there can be art therapy or music therapy, but the commitment to those children should be clear. We should also know the

percentage of their time in which they engage in the process, because some children at the extreme end are not engaging at all. We should continue to solve problems, as the whole concept of problem solving in respect of children should benefit them, at the end of the day. However, it is quite astonishing to see the schools taking responsibility for those children wherever they are, and engaging in review meetings about their future. Their commitment is quite outstanding.

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): You have already referred to the development of transferable skills and to a number of things that young people need to learn at school, rather than their simply concentrating on subjects. I wonder whether there is still too much focus on the structure and content of the curriculum and on the subjects that need to be learned, rather than on making more explicit the need to apply the skills that are taken from learning in other parts of life. Does the balance still need to be tipped towards making skill development more clearly important in the curriculum and subject matters less important?

Michael O'Neill: That is an interesting question. I agree with you to an extent. Of course, core skills were a key part of the national qualifications in higher still, but I do not think that things have fully worked. Unfortunately, at one point, the core skills were being drawn up at a different time from the contents of the examinations and we ended up, a few years ago, with the bizarre situation in which higher English did not deliver communication skills, which seemed a bit odd. That has been rectified to a certain extent.

Margaret Doran said that, at that point, the skills agenda was being driven by an examination. My question has always been, why must we examine everything? Are there valuable and important aspects of young people's time in school that do not have to be part of the examination system? I struggle with the idea of trying to evaluate how much a person's self-esteem, motivation and attitude have improved; I know that that can be done, but things become a little artificial at that point.

However, the success of some of the most successful people in Scotland today relates back to skills—enterprising skills, personal skills, attitudinal skills and so on. The quandary with which we struggle was outlined well by Margaret Doran. Schools recognise the need to deliver skills, which is often done in non-traditional ways. We are now much better across Scotland in promoting out-of-school-hours learning activities relating to music, sport, the arts, drama and so on, which give young people skills and have replaced the old supported study approach. However, those skills are often not recognised in the examination system and, when schools are pressurised by a national agenda that is driven by that system, skills are inevitably squeezed out.

10:15

The recognition by the inspectors that achievement as well as attainment should be acknowledged in their reports is a welcome change. A significant section of reports is now dedicated to explaining the extent to which a school is driving up achievement and giving young people opportunities beyond the narrow attainment targets. Schools are reluctant to embrace alternatives to the traditional curriculum, vocational aspects of education and so on because the achievements of young people who become involved in those alternatives, succeed personally, do well and go on to do other things are not recorded by the examination system. As a result, schools may be judged to have failed. It is ironic that success in delivering for young people what they need is sometimes deemed by the system to be a failure. The curriculum review group must address that quandary by flagging up the importance of skills and recognising that not everything can be assessed and examined in the traditional way. That does not make it less important—ironically, it makes it more important.

One step in the right direction would be to bring all the vocational work that is being done into the qualifications framework, so that it can be recognised. Currently, such work is not recognised. Some of the other experiences that young people have must be valued. ADES welcomed the national priorities, which placed an emphasis on some of the skills that we are discussing. The reports that authorities have to make to the Executive in December each year indicate the extent to which improvements have been made in those areas. However, we must constantly repeat at a national level that skills are important for young people and for the nation. The issue of the hierarchy of subjects in secondary education has been hinted at. Other achievements are acknowledged, but the point is made that really maths is important. That is true, but it is equally important that we focus on key life skills for young people.

Dr Murray: How do we get that message across? The Executive may have placed an emphasis on skills in the national priorities, but parental expectations and the entrance qualifications that people need in order to study at further or higher education institutions do not necessarily reflect that. There is still an emphasis on people needing to get five highers, including two As and three Bs, in order that they may study a certain subject. Is the problem partly the fact that the message has not got through either to parents, who have expectations about how well they want

their children to do in examinations, or to those who train young people after they leave school?

Michael O'Neill: I am sure that Margaret Doran will want to comment, but I will answer the question briefly. There are two aspects to the issue. You have not mentioned the world of business. The Confederation of British Industry has a role to play. At times, the business community is not slow to point out the extent to which education has not delivered. Research by the CBI—I refer to its response to a consultation a few years ago on an employability template—suggests that the very skills that we have been discussing, rather than attainment skills, make successful employees. However, when jobs are advertised employers still seek O-levels, which never existed in Scotland, even in the old days of standard grades.

Nationally, we must recognise the transferable, soft, human and attitudinal skills that are so valued by the world of work. Attainment is important for success at university—exam qualifications get people into university. However, the skills that we are discussing are those that make people successful when they are there. Qualifications get people jobs, but skills make them a success in those jobs. We are moving in the right direction, as the Parliament, the Minister for Education and Young People, schools and local authorities are placing much more emphasis on such skills.

In North Lanarkshire, pressure from schools on the need to recognise skills has led us to experiment with a North Lanarkshire passport at primary level and a diploma at secondary level, which will be launched next week and will do precisely that. Happily, Iain McMillan of CBI Scotland has agreed to badge that initiative with us. It reflects an effort by the authority to flag up the fact that skills are important. The approach allows the local authority to make that point to parents at prizegivings.

I would never want to suggest that attainment skills are not important—I think that they are the gateway—but we have to put on an even footing the gateway that gets you in and the skills that make you a success.

Margaret Doran: One of the principles that we agreed with the trade unions when we were working on "A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century: Agreement reached following recommendations made in the McCrone Report" was flexibility and transferable skills, not just for learners but for teachers. Unless teachers have opportunities to be flexible, innovative and creative, it is difficult for them to create such opportunities for children and young people. There is an issue about freeing up teachers to release the creative potential that they too have, and some of that will come from the way in which we interpret the curriculum. For instance, we should be encouraging more divergent and flexible approaches to timetabling in schools. The conditions for transferable skills would exist if there were a two-period day.

Balfron High School, which was built under the private finance initiative, was designed on the principles of being child centred, flexible, creative and coherent. That created learning environments in which young people were able to learn in learning spaces—not just in classrooms, but in different sizes of learning spaces. That arrangement encouraged and enabled teachers to come together as a team to plan a coherent experience for young people, so that they can develop a set of flexible, transferable skills that they can apply to different curricular areas.

I know that that sounds complicated, but I feel that, until we empower teachers and give them those opportunities to release them from the drudge of timetable slots of 45 or 50 minutes, they will not have opportunities to reflect on what they are doing, to explore an alternative curriculum with further education colleges or to share skills. Why not have an extended day or a flexible year for teachers? Perhaps we should be going in that direction rather than just sticking to the current 39-week year. Lots of other professionals could learn from the skills that teachers have, but the soft skills in group working and family group conferencing that community workers and social workers have could also be encouraged in developing relationships between teacher and child and between child and child. We could learn a lot more from one another by looking outwith the concept of the teacher in the classroom.

Dr Murray: Do we still have too many narrow subjects? You mentioned a two-period day. Should we be considering a curriculum that has fewer subjects but a broader skills content or a broader knowledge-acquisition content?

Michael O'Neill: I have no doubt that my colleagues from the Headteachers Association of Scotland will comment on that, but it is a difficult question. As a former secondary teacher of history and economics, I know that the secondary subject discrete areas have served us well; let us not pretend otherwise. They may now perhaps be part of a problem, but they have been a strength in the past. In the average secondary school, there are dedicated professional teachers with a tremendous knowledge of and enthusiasm for their subject area. That was a key strength, but in a sense it was also a key weakness, because it made them more reluctant to see the link, in terms of transferable skills, between their subject and the one that was being taught in the classroom next door.

For a number of years, we have been working with teachers to identify the fact that they are teaching the child, not teaching history. Margaret Doran has given some illustrations of that, and we must continue to work on that. We must demonstrate to teachers that there are links between what they teach and what other teachers teach, not just in terms of literacy and numeracy, which transfer across a range of subjects, but in terms of attitudes, values, self-esteem and motivation. That is what we have been moving towards.

I hope that some of the changes that have been brought about—by "A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century: Agreement reached following recommendations made in the McCrone Report"; by the curriculum review; by the emphasis that is now being put on the whole child; by the national priorities; by the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000; and by the new duty on local authorities that is about more than merely adequate or efficient education—will help us to recognise that those skills must be taught in the classroom. However, I believe that the current strength of the secondary subject area is something that we have to build on, rather than something whose time has now come.

There are plenty of good examples of subject areas that work together in the sciences, social subjects and creative arts and of new schools that are being built with areas in which music, dance and drama or sciences, for example, can be brought together. There are links in relation to the use of information technology. We are trying to work with existing staff who have the expertise and the enthusiasm and to point out, "This is not new for you; you are already doing it, but you must identify what you are doing and recognise its importance". It is not just about learning when world war I started or finished; the skills that are used to get there are also important and are not dissimilar to the skills that are being taught throughout the school.

That brings us back to your previous question about how the skills that we teach are not just attainment skills. To be blunt, in the past attainment skills meant knowledge, understanding, retention and repetition, rather than attainment skills per se. We have to recognise that. I think that most staff are willing to move down that line and to take a different approach. We have come a long way towards making that happen.

Rhona Brankin: If we accept that the curriculum is about the child's whole experience in the school, which links into their wider life experiences, I agree with what you say about the importance of considering what is assessed, because that has very much driven children's experiences in secondary school in the past. I agree that HMIE is moving to recognise achievement, which is important.

There is an increasing body of evidence that areas such as the arts and sport can drive up attainment. Have you seen that evidence? Should we make some schools into centres of excellence in areas such as sport, arts and culture or digital media, to ensure that every child has a good experience of that area? I am talking not just about the subject-based curriculum but about how the whole school experience and ethos can drive up attainment.

Michael O'Neill: I am smiling at Rhona Brankin, because I remember that a number of years ago she was the Deputy Minister for Culture and Sport when I chaired one of the groups for sport 21 that considered the issue that she raises.

I will comment on sports and the arts and Margaret Doran might want to talk about assessment. There is plenty of international research evidence that areas such as music, sport or the arts are important not just in their own right but because they can drive up attainment, because of how the brain works. Research from around the world has been showcased in Scotland by groups such as Tapestry, which has brought some important people to Scotland.

Members might know that in North Lanarkshire there are three sports comprehensives and a music comprehensive and that we are looking for funding for an expressive arts comprehensive. The important message is that we are not replicating specialist schools on the English model or on the model that exists in some schools in Scotland, which requires children to pass tests—by playing the violin, keeping the ball in the air or whatever—in order to get into a school that has distorted its curriculum to develop particular skills. There might be a place for such schools, although that is not my view. I am talking about neighbourhood comprehensives that have the expertise to offer enhanced opportunities to participate in music, sports or the expressive arts and which receive additional staffing and resources from the local authority.

The evidence from our sports and music comprehensives is being evaluated through the Executive's future learning and teaching programme and the early indications are that not only does that approach bring benefits in relation to pupils' lifestyles and attitudes, but it affects a school's ethos and pupils' attitudes to other subjects and leads to the involvement of other staff and improvements in overall attainment.

There is plenty of evidence from schools around the country that are experimenting with using the arts, sports and music as vehicles to help with a number of things. That approach has an impact on

lifelong learning, because young people go on learning after they leave school; on hobbies and lifestyles; on opportunities for work, because there are jobs to be had in those industries; and on attainment in other subjects. The approach has tremendous ability to increase self-esteem and improve attitudes and it provides opportunities to increase teamworking and improve communication skills. It contributes to the whole agenda for giving young people the skills that they will need when they leave school.

Recognition of the benefits is growing and I hope that research throughout the country will verify and vindicate that view. I like to think that, in the future, comprehensive schools in Scotland will still be comprehensive but that they will be different, because they have had an enhancement.

10:30

Margaret Doran: Rhona Brankin said that arts and sports can improve educational attainment. The link to attainment is interesting, but I want to focus on how arts and sports can contribute to achievement in the broadest sense, which is a different ball game. Do we assess a child's achievements only by considering things that we can measure?

At the Macrobert arts centre in Stirling—one of our partners—there is a consultancy group of 40 young people, who contributed to the design of the building from a young person's perspective. Each year, they are consulted about the programme—for example, they evaluate films for children. In autumn, the centre will run an international children's festival called "Discovery". The group contains the full range of children but one child in particular, who was quite disaffected, has turned out to have phenomenal potential in acting. He is a star turn. His attainment statistics will not be high at school, but his self-confidence and self-esteem have increased. It is also clear that he will have a career opportunity.

We recently held an exhibition called "Making an exhibition of yourself", which was specifically for young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and for children with additional support needs. About 140 children from three local authority areas in the central belt had their work on display. They had done that work with Artlink Central, who are a group of professional artists and sculptors who work with vulnerable children and young people to produce fantastic art. That takes me back to the social responsibility theme. Working in partnership with those young people, the artists and sculptors got the best out of them. They were not interested in the baggage; they were interested only in working with the children to help them to achieve their potential. The exhibition was very professional.

The way in which we judge children's performance is interesting. We need to find divergent ways of doing that, praising and encouraging young people in different ways. We should not consider only the school context or the curriculum.

Assessment is another fascinating area. A looked-after child may have different needs. If we consider staged interventions, and stages 1 to 4, we might find that a looked-after child is at stage 1 for their educational needs, causing some concern, but at stage 4 for their care needs. The child may have difficulties through having had different homes, different foster carers and a disrupted life. His or her health needs may be at stage 2. In such an assessment world, that child is quite complex when we consider the whole child. However, a teacher who knows the history of the child's care placements, and who knows that that child is therefore very vulnerable, will know how the child's performance in the curriculum can be affected. That information should be shared.

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 talks about co-ordinated support plans, but they are not child centred. The act talks about education-dominant co-ordinated support plans. Again, things are being seen from an education perspective. Perhaps one or two other services will be considered as well, but the lead service is education. However, for the looked-after child, the lead service should be social work, because that is where the child's greatest need lies.

People have to work together to help that child to achieve his or her full potential. We have to minimise the impact of changing home placements. Information has to be shared with teachers so that the child's educational potential can be maximised. The issue is complex, but the Scottish Executive and the Parliament need to think about the messages that they send out. When legislation is being developed, the needs of the whole child have to be considered and the impact of those needs on the child's development has to be assessed.

Rhona Brankin: In relation to schools' ability to deliver a wide range of experiences to youngsters, do you agree that it is important for authorities and head teachers to have in their complement of staff individuals who have not only skills in their subject areas but commitment to take after-school activities? For example, we should have drama teachers in every secondary school. What are your views on that?

Michael O'Neill: We have a strong complement of staff in our schools, and many if not all of the

generic skills and key skills that we have talked about this morning can be, and in many cases are, delivered by classroom teachers. The issue is about refocusing. In specialist areas such as sport and music, we need to consider the overall staffing complement of a school. Local and national measures in those areas include the provision of 200 to 300 active schools co-ordinators by sportscotland, in both primary and secondary schools; the money that has been provided by the new opportunities fund for out-of-school-hours learning and for physical education and sport in schools; and the cultural co-ordinators money that has been provided by the Executive to give young people in primary schools experience of music by P7. A range of moneys is available nationally—as Margaret Doran said, the moneys come from different streams, but they are pulled together locally, at least in the local authorities that I know about, to provide a coherent set of opportunities by adding to school staffing on a cluster basis, on a community school basis, or on another appropriate basis, to provide opportunities for youngsters to participate both during the day and in the twilight period.

There is a challenge. This comment might be controversial, but I like to think that the staff room of a secondary school in the future will contain, at tea-break time, not only the teachers whom we know and love at the moment but coaches who teach gymnastics, lecturers of the type that are employed in FE colleges at the moment and who teach hairdressing or beauty therapy, and music or drama specialists. That sort of school staffing will deliver appropriate experiences to youngsters, whereas the current situation is over-prescriptive and hide-bound—that issue relates to the General Teaching Council and to the way in which people get into teaching and increase their qualifications.

We must look to a future in which we bring in people who have the talent to deliver what young people need and we must recognise that different needs require different skills. There is no harm in having that type of staffing, which one would find in any business organisation. Perhaps our staffing model and our view of who can teach in schools belong in the 1970s rather than in 2004.

Rhona Brankin: Education authorities are developing models in which children's wider experience is considered; one of the reasons for that is that various separate pots of money have been going in. Perhaps this is an opportunity to examine what is happening out there and how that is built in and mainstreamed in education.

Margaret Doran: You will find that most authorities have a sports, arts and culture strategy. In our view, that should be an entitlement model, but it should show a progression. All children should have an entitlement but it should build through to children who have talent and are very able, who would be able to come together for concerts of, for example, traditional music, jazz or rock. There are lots of opportunities to work with other services to provide specialist support, as well as to ensure that everybody gets access and entitlement to basic experiences.

Michael O'Neill: Margaret Doran and Rhona Brankin touched on the fact that activities are funded by different funding streams. It would be helpful to have a single funding stream. At the moment, sportscotland funds sport activities and other aspects are funded by the Scottish Arts Council, the national priorities action fund and the new opportunities fund. However, all those funding streams cross into the same area.

Margaret Doran: They all need a plan and they all need a report.

Michael O'Neill: They all require information, and sometimes the criteria that apply are mutually exclusive, which makes it difficult to do what we all want to do for young people. The funding is there, and we make sense of it at local authority and school level, but it would be helpful for some of the funding streams to be pulled together, perhaps through the national priorities action fund, which has been helpful. I suggest that that fund is the correct vehicle to pull matters together, rather than quangos, which sometimes lead to delays in plans that are in place.

Rhona Brankin: It is probably because of the impregnability of the curriculum in the past that quangos have been delivering change in schools.

Michael O'Neill: True.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): I have a question about shortage subjects, such as classics, history, science, certain foreign languages and Gaelic. Is it central Government's responsibility to take steps actively to promote subjects in which there is a decline in uptake?

Michael O'Neill: That is an interesting question, the answer to which perhaps has two parts. One part is about teacher supply—you have named subjects in which there is a shortage of teachers—and the second relates to the nature of the subjects. The reasons why we are short of science teachers and why we are short of classics teachers are different.

In the past two or three years, the changes that have been introduced as a result of the document "A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century", which have no doubt been painful in many cases, have included attractive salaries, a much shorter pay scale, a guaranteed probation year, opportunities for continuing professional development and pay rates that are better than those of our colleagues south of the border. The

effects of those changes are beginning to kick in. As a result of the Executive's work, the teacher training colleges now take in significantly larger numbers of youngsters to train as teachers. Yesterday, North Lanarkshire hosted a welcome for 170 probationers who are due to start with us—we had 180 last year. More teachers are coming through the system into schools. It will take a number of years, but the problem is starting to be resolved through the increased uptake of places, the guaranteed probation year and the increased attractiveness of the career to young people. I would like to think that the issue of the overall supply of teachers will be addressed in the next two or three years.

The second part of the answer to your question is more difficult because it relates to the nature of the subjects that people teach, which depends on what they learned in school and their interests. We must generate science and maths teachers, but the opportunities for people who study those subjects are perhaps greater outwith education and fewer youngsters study science and engineering. My personal view is that we must recognise that, in a changing world, we move forward, which means that subjects such as classics will begin to decline when other subjects such as computing are introduced. I am not suggesting that classics and computing are related in some way but, as we move forward, the new replaces the old.

There will always be a place for subjects such as classics, but I am sure that Lord James is not suggesting that we go back to compulsion—to making young people study subjects that they do not want to study. The history of modern language teaching in Scotland is that by making the subject compulsory, we made it less attractive and gave ourselves a national problem. Compulsion does not work. The problem with classics is that youngsters no longer select it, which means that there are fewer teachers, which creates a downward spiral. I am reluctant to suggest that because you or I did Latin at school and we think that it has benefits, it should be compulsory.

We return to the point that every secondary teacher would say that their subject is crucial to world peace and that if we do not teach it, the world will collapse. That may be the case, but we must stand back and recognise that if youngsters do not opt to do certain subjects, those subjects will fade. Gaelic is perhaps a different case, given that it is a national language that is strong in the north of Scotland. Local authorities and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities are making efforts to ensure that the language is kept alive in the central belt. Places such as Glasgow and North Lanarkshire have Gaelic immersion primary and secondary education. The Minister for Education and Young People recently announced the establishment of a Gaelic secondary school in Glasgow. That creates the different problem of attracting enough teachers who can teach subjects in Gaelic in the secondary sector.

There are three problems. The first is the overall teacher shortage, which is being addressed—we are beginning to see an improvement, although it will take time. The second is the issue of attracting youngsters into subjects that we might regard as important to the nation. My concern is not that we are not attracting enough youngsters into subjects such as Gaelic or classics, but that we are not attracting enough youngsters into science and engineering. We should encourage them to take up those subjects. We must consider the advice that is given to 14-year-olds about the potential way forward when they are choosing which subjects to study. The advice that is given to young people about post-school opportunities and what they might do with their lives is crucial. Those same youngsters, if they get the qualifications, might decide to teach.

10:45

The last issue has been mentioned by the minister on several occasions and by the First Minister, and I whole-heartedly support their comments. We have to look again at the entrance qualifications and the GTC qualifications for teacher training in a number of subjects. On sport, the minister made the welcome announcement on Monday of an extra 400 PE teachers. We want to consider people who have appropriate qualifications in the world of sport, who could be trained to be teachers but who, if they were not good enough, would fail and not make the grade. I am not talking about dilution, but we want to open the door to opportunity. Equally, in computing or business studies, there are people who have qualifications that have stood them in good stead in the world of business, but some of the outdated regulations on what is required to enter teacher training keep those people out. Dealing with that matter will help to solve some of the problems of shortages in science and technical subjects and in other aspects of the curriculum.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: In answer to your question, to the best of my knowledge none of us is arguing for compulsion. Happily, I am in the position of asking the questions this morning. In your reference to classics and Gaelic, the inference was that provision should be demand driven, that encouragement should be given and persuasion used and that, provided that there is no teacher supply problem, there should be a choice for pupils.

What would your position be on foreign languages such as French, Italian, Spanish and German and other foreign languages for which

there may be considerable demand? How would you handle such demand, assuming that you could train the necessary number of teachers? How would you handle demand for science, bearing in mind the fact that the Scots have produced a quarter of all the great British inventions with only about 10 per cent of the population? How would you handle demand for a potential shortage subject, such as history? Do you regard those as matters on which guidance should be given and for which inspirational teachers should be encouraged, or would you just leave them as matters of choice for pupils?

Michael O'Neill: Those are hard questions. There is evidence of change and things that are working in two areas. Modern languages have been a national problem in Scotland. I am a prime example of how the previous modern languages system failed a lot of people in this room, because I went to the University of Glasgow and did a year's worth of French, but I do not speak any French whatsoever.

The problem is that in the late 1970s, when modern languages were not part of the core curriculum, young people opted out in their droves, and the number of those who opted in was small. I recollect that, at that point, huge numbers of modern language teachers were retrained to be computing, religious education or support-for-learning teachers. Then modern languages became part of the core and we had a shortage and had to bring people back.

As you are aware, the current position is that modern languages are compulsory and attainment levels are disastrous. A large number of young people do modern languages who do not wish to—they are of little relevance or assistance to them. However, we have to balance that with the fact that modern languages are a key part of the curriculum and that it is important for Scottish youngsters to be bilingual.

There are ways in which we can address the problem. We should expand the good work that is done in primary schools with the modern languages project and build it into first and second year. In early secondary, we have to look at ways in which modern languages departments can make the subjects more attractive and relevant, and entice young people to see the possibilities for their future, which we have not been good at doing in the past. We also have to examine the success of Gaelic and consider experimenting with immersion in foreign languages in primary 1, 2 and 3 as a way of building a base that leads to young people deciding that they want to do modern languages at the end of second year because they have that skills base.

We also have to consider the languages that are on offer—that is a North Lanarkshire view, not an ADES view. I referred to school staff teaching what they were taught. When I was at school—I am sure that this was the same for others in this room—French was the dominant language, followed by German and a little bit of Spanish and Italian. In North Lanarkshire we asked about the extent to which a North Lanarkshire youngster might intend to visit Germany or even France and use the language. In fact, significant numbers from the west of Scotland will visit Spain and Italy, because of family connections. We took the decision to promote Spanish and Italian, which met with a degree of success because young people see those languages as more relevant to their family, holiday and lifelong circumstances. The evidence to date suggests that there has been increased uptake of, and increased success in, those languages, because of links and exchanges. Tackling the issue of modern languages is about involving the primary sector, providing early experience and being careful about the languages to which we want to expose young people. They should be exposed to languages that they might view as being more relevant in the future.

Science is a much more difficult area, because it affects Scotland's future prosperity in manufacturing. It is an area of concern, given what Lord James Douglas-Hamilton has said about Scotland's role in invention in the past. I am not sure that the concern is about the supply of staff, as that will be solved in the next two or three years. We need to make young people excited about science and the opportunities that it offers.

I am not aware that there is huge problem with the uptake of science. After all, science is still compulsory in third and fourth year in every secondary school in Scotland. The vast majority of young people will do one or two science subjects. The issue is that we ensure that what pupils study at school relates the world of work. We want them to see science as something that they can use after school, rather than as a school subject. However, there may be other issues of which I am not conscious.

On history, I can speak as a former teacher of the subject—I hope that I was inspirational. From my knowledge of the teacher training statistics, I think that we still have a surplus of teachers in most of the social subject areas, because of the popularity of such subjects in schools and the huge intake into colleges of young people who have opted to take a social subject or an arts degree instead of science or engineering. The general trend around the country is that there is not a shortage of history teachers, although there may be exceptions in particular areas.

In many places, there have been discussions about history's place in the curriculum and

whether it should still be compulsory. I know that, in first and second year, instead of teaching history, geography and modern studies separately, schools are experimenting with bringing them together into a more coherent grouping. Given that we are arguing for a flexible curriculum and are suggesting that at the end of second year in secondary school—after nine years of general education—pupils should have choice, we cannot say that they should still be doing particular subjects because we think that those subjects are important. As a nation, we face the issue of trusting the profession and letting go a little bit post-second year, as most other European countries do.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I have two final questions. First, am I correct in thinking that you feel that there may be a role for the Administration's Education Department to provide guidance on those matters from time to time? Secondly, how might schools go about offering greater vocational training and putting more emphasis on soft skills—for which there have been calls—and would you like more S3 and S4 pupils to go to further education colleges to pursue such training?

Margaret Doran: I think that the original question was whether central Government should promote subjects in which there has been a decline. Following that theme, the notion of central Government determining the subjects that young people should study flies in the face of what we have been doing for years. Our position has been that the market—the children and the parents—determines which subjects are chosen. That has led to a decline in subjects such as classics.

There is an issue about central Government determining the core skills that young people should be acquiring and the key expectations that they should be meeting. Are those core skills literacy, numeracy, IT, problem solving and working with others, or is there a case for promoting innovation, creativity and design technology? Where are we going? That goes back to the question of the purpose of schooling. What skills, knowledge and understanding are we giving young people and what attitudes are we developing in them that will stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives?

I do not think that the issue is as straightforward as determining which subject areas children should study; the market takes care of that. The key issue is the life skills—which you have called soft skills, although I am not entirely comfortable with that description—that young people need. Although those are harder to promote, to do so would make a lot more sense.

The Convener: If I followed Lord James Douglas-Hamilton's question, I think that the key issue that you were being asked about was the place for Government guidance in the matter and whether tighter guidance should be provided.

Margaret Doran: The second question was about vocational training. I do not know of any school or authority that does not already provide connections to courses for young people in S3 and S4. Some 30 to 40 youngsters in several of our schools have a Friday slot—some have longer than that—in the local further education college, where they follow a construction trades course that is linked to the Construction Industry Training Board. There are many such developments throughout the country.

Michael O'Neill: I have strong views about that. As I said in my initial comments, vocational education is probably the most crucial area for comprehensive schools in Scotland over the next few years. It is crucial not just because we have a skills shortage but because of a range of issues, including attitudes, behaviours and discipline. The 26 headteachers in North Lanarkshire strongly support my view that vocational education is not just about delivering courses in FE colleges. If the future is about busing 14 or 15-year-old pupils to colleges up and down the country, it will not work.

We need to change how schools operate so that when pupils at the age of 14 sit down to make their choices, the option column lists "French", "English", "German", "hairdressing" and "construction trades" as subjects that they can pick to study in school. If we can provide science, music and technical subjects in school, why cannot we provide construction and other trades? At the age of 16 or 17, pupils should then be able to attend FE college to continue with higher levels of vocational skills that cannot be taught in schools or to take up an apprenticeship that is linked to, and provided in partnership with, colleges.

I am strongly opposed to the view that vocational education should be provided only by colleges. If schools in France, Germany and Spain can deliver vocational education as part of the normal school curriculum, why cannot we do that in Scotland? A school cannot be called comprehensive if it does not allow all pupils the opportunity to develop their skills but affords that opportunity only to a small group. That is a key point about curriculum flexibility.

The Convener: That is an interesting thought, but we will need to leave it sticking to the wall because we need to move on.

Ms Byrne: I was going to ask about that concept, but the witnesses have given us a good insight that has been extremely interesting.

I want to ask about higher still, which has not been touched on so far. What range of courses is available through access and intermediate levels

in higher still? How do those different levels fit into a more flexible school curriculum? What progress is being made and what difficulties are being encountered in that kind of bi-level teaching, which I know has been a problem since higher still's introduction? How has that been dealt with? How do you see higher still working alongside the other visions that you have given us this morning?

Michael O'Neill: Both Margaret Doran and I have spent what seems like a lifetime on the various national groups that have considered higher still over the past number of years, so both of us will comment on those issues.

Opportunities to study access, intermediate 1 and intermediate 2 courses are, I think, increasing and the picture is improving. Initially, many schools focused—perhaps rightly—on the new higher because that was the gold standard that allowed youngsters to go to university. However, people then began to offer courses at the other levels. Many special schools have done a lot of good work in developing and presenting access, intermediate 1 and intermediate 2 courses for which certification has been sought from the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

The majority of secondary schools are providing a growing menu from which youngsters can pick the choice that is appropriate to them. A few years ago, young people at the end of fourth year still had nowhere to go because they could not study an appropriate subject at an appropriate level. That is less the case now, but there is still work to be done. I am sure that some schools do not offer appropriate courses in every subject area. For example, history might not be offered at intermediate 1 or 2 either because the school has not developed the expertise or because the size of the school makes it difficult to offer the subject. We perhaps need to consider making more use of consortiums, online learning and developments such as the Scottish common higher open learning and access resources—SCHOLAR—programme.

On bi-level teaching, I sometimes have a difficulty with that term. Throughout my teaching career, every class that I have taught has been a mixed-ability class with youngsters who were at different levels. What most plagued the profession about higher still was that, unfortunately, many courses were initially designed with different contents and contexts. To take the example that I used earlier, instead of allowing intermediate 1 and 2 history to be taught in the same class by ensuring that the two levels had a similar course structure, we ended up with different content in each level. Over the past two to four years, that issue has been addressed by the various subject reviews that the minister instigated. We have still to get there, but the answer is to ensure that all subjects use compatible contents and contexts so that the two levels can be taught in one class. Often, that need not mean big class sizes. A few years ago, we carried out a survey of 26 schools in North Lanarkshire, to establish the average size of a fifth and sixth-year French class, which is not a bad example. The average class size was seven. The issue was not big classes, but ensuring that the courses on offer were appropriate at different levels.

11:00

Margaret Doran: I will not repeat what Michael O'Neill has said, but another issue that has caused a wee bit of pressure in the system is what parents look for from young people and national expectations for schools to report on attainment in highers in S5. There is a failure to consider two-year highers or intermediate as a way forward. We must do a lot of work to sell to parents the argument that there are other routes to highers at S6 and that it is okay to get there in two years or via intermediate.

Another issue is that we are still reporting performance in highers at the end of S5, so schools are still feeling under pressure to get children through. That does not allow flexibility. It is worth my highlighting that tension to the committee. Schools can also be criticised by HMIE and others for the number of children who are registered as having no awards. We would say that it is okay to try.

Ms Byrne: Do you see higher still fitting into a flexible curriculum in the longer term? What are the best ways of resolving some of the problems that have been identified?

Michael O'Neill: I see higher still fitting into a flexible curriculum. I suspect that, in the longer term, we will see the end of standard grade as it currently exists. Standard grade is a product of its time and the need for it may have passed. That will not happen in the near future, as there are still many people for whom it has great strengths and for whom it delivers. However, I notice that departments and schools in North Lanarkshire are already opting to move from standard grade to the national qualifications framework—intermediate 1 and 2 and highers—because they see it as a more appropriate way forward and as a coherent pathway that enables people to move from access 1 through to advanced higher. That decision is being made by individual school departments. As I am sure members know, some authorities have gone over completely to that approach. I suspect that, in an incremental way over time, the national qualifications framework will become the framework for secondary schools.

Of course, work will need to be done on some contents and contexts to make the framework

appropriate for younger children. Some of the courses are designed for access by adults and are not appropriate for 14-year-olds. The outcomes may be appropriate, but the context and the framework need to be changed. That has been happening. Over time, some of the problems that we face in relation to the SQA, markers, the cost of the exam system and over-assessment may be resolved. An amended national qualifications framework will be the structure towards which we move in future. Vocational qualifications can be incorporated into the framework, in order to make it holistic.

Mr Ingram: I return to the issue of university education. As we know and as you have indicated, the achievement of exam results still flags up success in the system and enables kids to get to university. Paradoxically, the skills that are necessary for people to make a success of university education are not necessarily recognised. Is there enough discussion among schools, education authorities and the university sector about recognising those skills and bringing about change in the curriculum?

Michael O'Neill: That is an interesting question, which has been raised and discussed at length with colleagues in the higher and further education sectors in the various national groups of which Margaret Doran and I have been members. In the view of the school sector and of local authorities, universities have been reluctant to recognise the changes that have taken place in schools in the past five or six years and to recognise the new qualifications. That has created problems for local authorities when they try to promote those qualifications.

Perhaps the best example, which annoyed me at the time and still does, is what happened with the advanced higher, which was designed to make the sixth year a more meaningful year for the most able pupils. In the past, a pupil with perhaps five As at higher came back to school—quite rightly, given their level of maturity—for a year during which they could take part more in school shows and debates and get prepared for a different environment at university. We had to consider how to make the sixth year more relevant to them and the advanced higher was going to solve that problem. It was going to go down the A level line by allowing pupils to take the subjects that they had chosen to the next level and would equate to university first year. If a pupil ended up with three advanced highers at grade A or B, they would bypass first year and go straight on to second year. Given the length of a degree course in Scotland compared with that in England and the costs to parents and pupils, of which the committee is well aware, that was an attractive proposition as it would maintain the rigour of the qualification while providing a way of progressing.

That is how the advanced higher was developed, but the universities refused to accept it. Their approach was to say, "We'll decide what we accept and we'll decide what it's worth and what it counts for." It is still the case—I am sure that my HAS colleagues can verify this—that when schools phone universities to ask what a pupil with X or Y should do, the advice is invariably, "Don't do an advanced higher; do two or three more highers." The unwillingness of the university sector to work with the school sector and local authorities to provide a coherent pathway is an issue. There is great frustration, because it appears that universities are autonomous, independent and unaccountable.

Margaret Doran: Michael O'Neill is right, but one of the ways through that would be for people to work together. In the Stirling area, representatives of the University of Stirling, the colleges, the authorities and the head teachers from the secondary schools meet twice a year to tease out the issues and we constantly debate the issues that Michael O'Neill has just been talking about. We have designed various partnership activities, one of which is called ladders of learning, the purpose of which is to encourage into university young people who have been identified in schools as not coming from a tradition of going to university. Another example is that we encourage young people who are very able in particular areas, such as science, to participate in link courses with the university. We also have a comprehensive model involving pathways whereby for a week in June young people who are not likely to go to university experience college and university courses and undertake work experience, which lets them see the range of possibilities of what they can do. The other part of the partnership is the education facility in the University of Stirling. Student teachers go on placement not just in our schools in Stirling but in lots of schools throughout the country. By doing so, they pick up from people in schools thoughts about where we are going. We will be their employers, so they hear our expectations with regard to the skills that we expect of them. The probationers induction programme is an intensive two-week training programme to develop new teachers in the broadest sense in relation to what we have been talking about today.

The Convener: Could you provide us with more detail on that in writing? That would be useful to us.

Margaret Doran: Yes.

Michael O'Neill: The other project to mention is the greater opportunity of access and learning with schools—GOALS—project in the west of Scotland, which involves 12 local authorities and all the universities in the area and provides not just

summer schools but an on-going mentoring programme to encourage young people who might not otherwise go to university. Five secondary schools and their clusters are involved—the project runs from primary school all the way through to secondary school. A big programme of work has been running for the best part of four or five years.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): The age-and-stage relaxation is one of the most high profile areas of curriculum flexibility. In what ways has it been successful and what are its disadvantages? We heard evidence last week that it is viewed as a technique to accelerate pupils through their exams in a highly pressured way—focus has fallen on children sitting standard grades in primary 7. Is the age-and-stage relaxation working and could it be built on? Are pupils and parents signed up to, or supportive of, the relaxations or is it a teacher-driven initiative?

Michael O'Neill: With any initiative, there will be elements in certain schools and authorities that will make one say, "I'm not too sure about that." My general understanding, from talking to people in the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, is that the age-and-stage regulations have been welcomed, are working and are improving young people's learning experiences.

The document that is being circulated to the committee at the moment is North Lanarkshire's curriculum guidelines from 2001, which were the result of a huge consultation. The most supportive groups in the consultation were the fifth-year and sixth-year pupils and the parents, and the most anxious groups were the Educational Institute of Scotland and the teachers who, although they supported the principles, were concerned about issues such as staffing, timetables and other practicalities. The young people were different, however. I remember going to a conference at which I was trying to explain the modes to young people. I got only 30 seconds into my presentation before I realised that they understood exactly what I was talking about. Our parents consultative group was equally strongly supportive.

At the moment, youngsters in a couple of schools are starting standard grade English and maths in their second year and will sit the examination at the end of their third year. That has been done based on consultation of parents. I get a regular monthly update from head teachers, who get feedback from the youngsters and parents. At the end of the first year of the project, the feedback from pupils—I believe that the media interviewed some of the pupils—is that they are enjoying what they see as being an appropriate challenge.

The aim is not to accelerate youngsters: the aim is to give them an appropriate challenge rather than to hold them back on the basis of an unnatural rule—which existed in the previous system—that says that people must be a certain age before they can take a course. The ADES took the view that we do not require such an over-prescriptive rule, which is not used in many other parts of the world. Perhaps we have an opportunity to give young people appropriate choices. If it is appropriate for someone to sit standard grade at the end of their third year, then it is appropriate to allow that. Likewise, if it is appropriate that someone else sit it at the end of their fourth year, it is appropriate to allow that, too. Schools can make such decisions if they are given guidance and the ability to do so. That is better than presenting them with a blanket rule that says that they cannot decide what is appropriate for individuals.

The age-and-stage regulations must be seen in the context of the flexible curriculum, which allows schools that serve areas such as Lenzie or Bearsden to take a different approach from those that serve deprived areas in Glasgow, North Lanarkshire and Stirling. The flexible curriculum and the age-and-stage regulations will make the curriculum more appropriate and will allow young people to maximise their achievement at the appropriate time.

The Convener: Wendy—would you like to ask a question?

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): I will forego my question, convener, although I had one. You helpfully circulated a timetable for today's meeting. For everyone's guidance, I point out that we will in the next questioning session—if we stick to the timetable—have only 30 seconds for committee members to ask, and less than a minute for the two panel members to answer, each question. I do not know how you intend to resolve that, but it would be helpful if, before the start of the next part of the meeting, you gave us guidance about the extent to which you want to move away from the agreed timetable or get us back on track.

The Convener: The timings are notional and we must take the morning as it comes.

It would be helpful if our witnesses could get back to us on some of the points that have been raised, for example on the GOALS project. I thank them for their attendance.

Our second panel consists of Alex Easton, the president of the education committee of the Headteachers Association of Scotland, and Brian Cooklin, the organisation's convener.

11:15

Alex Easton (Headteachers Association of Scotland): I will briefly paint the backcloth of the

situation as we see it and I hope that I will tantalise you. I think that your questions will be of much more interest to you than what we say, but I hope that I will put in enough things for you to follow up. Brian Cooklin will say a little about the age-and-stage relaxation consultation, which was an interesting debate that had several sides to it. Brian and his committee fronted the association on that.

HAS agrees with Philip Rycroft and the Scottish Executive Education Department and we think that we have strong, healthy and robust relationships with Peter Peacock, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in respect of the major issues. The principle that underpins all initiatives—this was stressed earlier—is that everything nowadays should be about meeting the different needs of individuals in every school. In the past, we often felt that there was initiative overload—members will have heard that phrase. There are many initiatives at the moment, but we believe that—to use an analogy—they are not individual planks floating in the sea; rather, they are all nailed together to make a boat whose destination is to meet the needs of individuals.

Last week, research results from the programme for international student assessment showed comparatively how Scotland is doing. Without being complacent, the picture for able youngsters is good. We perform well in that area, so why do we need flexibility there? The answer is that the one failure in higher still is the two-term dash. Members may want to come back on that issue, because it has things to offer.

Compared with other countries, we perform less well with disengaged youngsters. Of course, there are social and economic reasons for that, but disengaged youngsters are a high priority and a target for us. The research referred to other matters, such as the role of vocational courses, their relationship with colleges and, above all, the straitjacket of the current crude targets, which do not recognise many other valid achievements that are gained through, for example, the skill force project and the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network. However, we think that there are ways round that.

I will pass over to Brian Cooklin, because I think that members' questions will relate to what he has to say. He will explain where we think the balance should be between freedom, licence and accountability.

Brian Cooklin (Headteachers Association of Scotland): I will deal with the age-and-stage regulations consultation that was completed recently, which was a major debate and a major source of discussion. Philosophically, there is widespread support among head teachers for total abolition of regulation because, to many, the regulations appear to be based on organisational requirements and administrative needs rather than on the needs of the child. Many people question whether efficient administration is more important than offering intellectual stimulation for developing minds. That is the philosophical position.

We are realists and pragmatists, however, and we recognise that we must operate in the environment in which we are. Therefore, the outcome of the consultation debate was to favour the option that allowed a balance between regulation and protection of the flexibility that is required to meet better the learning needs of individual children. We are particularly in favour of that option because it allows the roles of local authorities and HMIE in providing support and guidance to be recognised and respected. It also removes the possibility that there will be a free-for-all.

Relaxing age-and-stage regulations involves fundamental practical issues. If we allowed every school to adopt any package and approach that it wanted, we would have major difficulties when children and families moved from one part of the country to another. If we tried only to address individual children's needs, we would also encounter a difficulty in that children mature at different stages. Therefore, we could be faced with the problem of piling pressure on a group of children because it had been organised in such a way that the children would receive a particular qualification when some of them were not ready for it. The major concern of many teachers is that we may try to sweep children along across the board, although intellectual understanding and depth and levels of appreciation are different for different children.

There is also concern about parental pressure in that parents might say that their child should do a higher in first year because the parents feel that the child is gifted. Special arrangements can be made for individual children but, in the real world, we might well build up a head of steam if we offered licence. The best option is flexibility.

Alex Easton: Head teachers are much more confident and feel much more empowered to be creative, flexible and radical and to go against thinking. The butt of that is that we should always be held to account or be able to justify anything that we do in the context of the national priorities. HMIE has a key role in that respect. For example, my school has relaxed its approach to modern languages. I must be able to show my rationale for doing so and to demonstrate that I consulted parents, staff and pupils fully. Above all, I should be able to answer HMIE's horrible question: "So what?" In other words, can I show that what I did made a difference? That is why we are arguing for increased flexibility.

I could cite some super examples of such flexibility. In February, we held our best-ever conference, at which we heard from some of our best practitioners, such as Brian Miller from Dalziel High School, who was mentioned by Michael O'Neill; Alan Jones from Eastbank Academy in the east end of Glasgow; and Moira Leck from Lawside Roman Catholic Academy, which is in a difficult catchment area in Dundee. They are doing a fantastic job of bringing a whole range of flexibilities. We do not want anarchy, but we would like a total relaxation.

The Convener: I have been struck by the emphasis that has been put on choice and opportunity for children, who of course are young people at various stages of development and who have a varying ability to make decisions. I wonder whether we are talking about total, free and isolated choice or the guided choice that takes place within the significant constraints imposed by particular schools or local authorities. Clearly, timetables and other matters limit children from having a choice of everything on earth that they might want to do. On the other hand, I understand why you want to be able to say to children, "If you don't like this subject, you don't have to do it". However, life itself is not quite like that. What issues arise from such constraints? Is demotivation the only criterion in this respect?

Alex Easton: Schools are largely market driven. Time moves on and subjects that did not exist in our day such as business administration, business management, media studies and psychology are now typically being taught in schools.

However, you are right to suggest that youngsters need advice, which is where the pastoral and guidance aspects that form such a great strength of Scottish schools come into play. If we were to ask most parents to name the professional whom they trusted and knew best, a very high percentage would name the people to whom they relate in secondary schools. That is why part of our job is to give children strong advice about the position of things at key stages of their lives. However, youngsters and parents nowadays know their rights and the market comes into operation. We need to strike a balance between giving strong advice to children and providing freedom of choice within the available resources.

Brian Cooklin: The matter is determined largely by practical issues. We are talking about guided choice; sometimes, that choice is very much guided, because it is determined by the staff, by accommodation, by curriculum guidelines that people operate under and by national and local policies. All those aspects must be considered.

However, the other side of the question is: what do children need for the next stage? After all, that is where the pressure comes. Parents want to ensure that children are equipped with the necessary qualifications to enable them to go into the career, college course or university course that they are aiming for. Although the aim is laudable, it comes up against the problem—which was mentioned earlier—that we need to equip children with other skills to allow them to cope in the wider world.

Moreover, such an approach does not address issues such as parity of esteem. How do we get across the idea that it is just as important to set up one's own business and contribute to one's local economy as it is to gain five highers and become the doctor, accountant or lawyer that many parents want their children to become? It is not easy to address such a fundamental issue, but choice must be offered within such a framework. The main point relates to continuity and progression. Are children able to progress and achieve something with whatever choice is offered at whatever stage, or are we are merely giving them a short-term fix?

Dr Murray: You have already partly answered a question that I asked the previous witnesses, who said that you would have an expert view on the matter. First, on subject structure, what is your view of the idea that we perhaps have too many narrow subjects and that subjects could be grouped together later on in the curriculum so that the transferable skills could be more explicit, possibly with individual specialisation within them?

Secondly, the point was made to us last week that there is a notion that although a person must have a higher in a science in order to study that science at university, they can study philosophy having never studied it at school. Are there ways in which the curriculum could be changed in schools, and do we need a debate with higher education about what it expects in terms of people progressing?

Alex Easton: It is correct that the great strength of Scottish schools, which has served Scotland well, has been the subject departments. However, things are moving. For instance, in my school there will from August no longer be 17 or 18 principal teachers in separate departments; there will be a head of science, a head of languages—covering modern languages and English—and so on. We are moving into faculty groupings and away from the plethora of subjects.

In my school, it is not unusual for pupils to have one teacher for all their social subjects, rather than separate teachers for history, geography, modern studies, integration of science and so on. There is a trend towards reducing the plethora. Many of the divisions of knowledge are artificial: they are not real, but are human artefacts. However, there will still be a role for subject specialism and expertise. Next week, when our schools finish for the

summer, the children in primary 7 will have had one teacher who was able to teach them numeracy, literacy and a wide range of other subjects. Seven weeks later, suddenly their teachers will be saying, "I can cope only with a very narrow subject." There is not something magic that happens over those seven weeks; there is much more scope for interface between primary and secondary schools on such issues.

Brian Cooklin: It is fundamental that we consider what outcome we want to achieve. With all due respect, we can become hung up on a discussion about other approaches to subject departments. What works? What works is successful interaction between a teacher and a group of pupils—rapport with the youngsters, and energy and enthusiasm. There are many ways in which to achieve that. Subject departments deliver successfully in terms of subject specialism; we would be foolish to throw that to one side and ignore it. However, I will give the committee two examples of recent developments.

One can see the enthusiasm behind the assessment is for learning programme, which Learning and Teaching Scotland is leading. There are examples of that enthusiasm all round the country and teachers are volunteering to get involved. That programme is harnessing an energy and enthusiasm that sparks off the children. Also, developments in enterprise education and creativity have come in all manner of surprising quarters.

To some extent, that deals with the question that Lord James Douglas-Hamilton asked about shortage subjects. The shortage subjects are alive and well in many areas because they are delivered by teachers who communicate successfully and inspirationally. That is the key across the board. Any subject can be delivered successfully anywhere to any group of children if it is delivered by the right person in the right circumstances. It is as simple, and as difficult, as that.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Do you think that there is a need for guidance from the Scottish Executive Education Department on behalf of the Administration? With regard to promotion of greater vocational training and greater emphasis on soft skills, would you like more S3 and S4 pupils to go to further education colleges to pursue such training or would you prefer a different solution?

11:30

Brian Cooklin: Guidance is always helpful, as long as it is treated as guidance. There has sometimes been an impression that guidance is the same as regulations, so clarity is needed about what it means. Guidance is useful because it allows all schools to operate consistently and gives them a clear steer about the directions in which to go.

If the guidance were phrased, as was suggested earlier, to address shortage subjects, that would merely move the shortage somewhere else. There is a finite number of pupils in a school, and there is a staffing standard in operation. If one subject goes up, another subject goes down. If we encourage a subject in which there is a shortage, the natural consequence is that another subject will experience a shortage. It would depend what the guidance contained, but we would welcome it in principle because it would aid consistency and it would help with quality assurance.

Alex Easton: I will pick up the point about links with FE colleges. There is obviously a role for collaborative working with everyone playing to their strengths. Colleges can deliver subjects and expertise that schools never could. We recently had some youngsters doing mechatronics. It took me until last week to discover what the subject is—it could not be delivered in schools.

There could be much greater movement in schools and there could be much more flexibility in the design of schools: Balfron High School has been mentioned as a model of excellence. We could cover areas such as construction, care, teacher training, initial teacher education—ITE—and the whole concept of lifelong learning.

I remember speaking to Alex Neil's and Annabel Goldie's Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee about the whole lifelong learning dimension. Teachers now have a commitment to continuing professional development, which involves training for the purpose of changing subjects. I now have three qualified media teachers, although they all started off as music teachers. There is great scope for many FE courses to be taught in schools using FE staff—as long as they are registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland, which is still a little bit of a hot potato. Things are done a bit arbitrarily and in an ad hoc way at the moment. It depends how good the local authority is and how well it links with schools.

As with many things, the key is that people get proper credit. If they do not have a bit of paper to prove that they have achieved something, if they do not have a number for it or if it does not show up against a target, then it does not exist. We argue that the Scottish credit and qualifications framework—the SCQF—offers the way ahead for achieving parity of status and esteem for subjects that are unfortunately seen as lesser subjects, which applies particularly to vocational subjects. The situation is very different in the United States and most of mainland Europe, so we must tackle

the low-esteem group—which is mainly male, I am afraid—that is perhaps of greatest concern. Collaborative working is happening, but much more could be done.

Rhona Brankin: Which subjects have been particularly successful in recent years? I am aware of the success of standard grade music and the number of youngsters who opt to do it. What is your thinking on drama teachers in secondary schools?

Alex Easton: There is a shortage of drama teachers. It is a bit like having a basket with so many eggs in it. If you wish to take out an egg called a drama teacher, you have to put another egg back into the staffing formula. High-quality drama teaching adds enormously to youngsters' experience. I will not go over the earlier debate that the committee had on the subject, but the creative and aesthetic subjects have intrinsically so much to offer in their own right.

The best things that underachieving boys can be given are self-worth and self-belief. Their lives may contain—I hate to say it—negative male role models, so the solution is to find out what they can do. If a boy is good at football, for example, he can effectively be bought into the school because of that. We never have bother with boys who are contributing to their teams and who play in the school rock band and so on. I am not sure whether that directly answers the question.

Brian Cooklin: There is a fundamental issue to address. In my school, music, drama and physical education are the three outstanding departments and it is no coincidence that they deliver many of the extra-curricular and out-of-hours clubs and activities. We are fortunate in that we have, because of the commitment of the staff who deliver them, more than 50 clubs and activities at my school.

Your question about music will probably touch on a later question. However, the development of intermediate courses in music and the changes in the higher music courses have been highly significant in that they have opened up the subject to a large number of boys—it was a predominantly female subject until recent years—because, for example, sound engineering is now available. We have converted one of our practice rooms into a recording studio, which has made a huge difference as far as boys are concerned.

On drama, you are preaching to the converted. I agree entirely with what Alex Easton says; drama is a tremendous engine for raising self-esteem and self-respect. Not to put too strong an emphasis on it, it is uplifting to say the least to see the number of children who blossom when they stand on stage and perform material that they have written, although they have great difficulty communicating, are shy and do not gain as much as they could from other subjects. Drama delivers personal and social education across the spectrum; it is a significant subject.

Ms Byrne: Will you explain a bit more about higher still and the two-term dash? Also, how do you see the development of higher still fitting into the flexible curriculum?

Alex Easton: Many schools think that second year is lost and that standard grades and national qualifications should be started then. That would allow the option of a first go at external exams at the end of S3 and of a second go at such exams at the end of S4, but above all, for the able youngsters it would allow two years to concentrate on doing highers because they could work for highers in S4 and S5. I believe—it is certainly also the belief of people such as Brian Miller—that that could, at the top end, drive a rise in attainment.

Rhona Brankin mentioned standard grade music. It does not exist in my school, but the school is strong on music because the music department has totally switched to NQs. The 15 years since standard grades replaced ordinary grades might seem to be a short time, but NQs are fresher courses and in music, as Brian Cooklin said, they are about music technology as much as they are about performance.

Lord James talked earlier about shortage subjects. The subject that is in meltdown is home economics. Loads of schools are going to wipe it from their timetables because since what I called the dough school—I do not know its correct name—in Glasgow shut, virtually no home economists are coming through. Home economics departments have largely abandoned standard grades. Fifteen years ago, they made the mistake of wishing to be academic by reducing the practical element, which is not what youngsters who were buying into home economics wanted. However, the national qualification courses that are replacing standard grade home economics are very practical and health focused.

Those are a couple of examples of NQs coming in. I doubt whether standard grades will disappear in my professional lifetime, but they are certainly on the retreat. In some subjects, there is a belief that the standard grade course is still robust and that to replace it would be to fix what ain't broke, but the situation varies from subject to subject. Because of the costs and resource implications, it seems a bit odd to have two absolutely equivalent systems running in parallel for ever.

Brian Cooklin: I remind the committee that the subtitle of higher still was "opportunity for all". That is precisely what it delivers in many instances throughout the country. It is still evolving and developing, but schools are considering altering

access courses in first and second year because they want to accredit the skills that pupils have. The beauty of the access courses and some intermediate 1 courses is that there is no final exam; the work is based entirely on what the pupils are able to achieve throughout the year at different stages, and is internally assessed. That means that they are able to build some of the skills about which we talked earlier and to move on to the next stage of intermediate 1 and 2 and higher.

Higher still's major advantage is that it addresses children's needs. Take the situation in computing, for example: many children choose computing and many parents want them to choose computing because they equate computing and IT with jobs. The rationale is that most jobs involve computers and that the children ought therefore to study computing. The problem is that the standard grade computing studies course is very technically driven; there is an expectation that the pupils will understand the mechanics—that they know a mother board from a wash board—and that they will understand how to fix or program the computer.

That does not interest many children and, in practice, it is not what they are going to do. When they go into IT, they need to be able to use the software packages and machines. The beauty is that intermediate 1 and 2 courses are geared towards those pupils and they have a guided choice. Those who are interested in the wider technical and programming aspects are advised to do the standard grade course, which is why they are running in tandem at present. That is but one practical example of such courses.

Alex Easton: We have almost entirely wiped out standard grade foundation level and replaced it with access 3, which is internally assessed. The youngsters respond to short-term goals and it is difficult for them to start something on which they will sit an external exam in two years, because their minds are not programmed in that way. However, now there is a series of nine units and the teachers can say, "Look, you have passed the first one of the nine units by November in third year."

One of the pressures that we would like to see put on the SQA is that we would also like intermediate 1 to be entirely internally assessed, with moderation, as happened during the Scottish Vocational Education Council days. Such a movement would be a big advance for those vulnerable youngsters on whom we are passionately focusing.

Ms Byrne: I will go back to the more imaginative things that have been happening with the curriculum. We are all very keen that the arts and drama should come back. I know that many schools that did not have drama teachers were experimenting with bringing in people from other parts of the local authority who ran other projects or with buying projects in from colleges. Digital photography is one example of that. How are the resources for developing all those other aspects of the curriculum bearing up? Is there funding to buy things in, when it is necessary to do that, and to build on and get the skills into the schools?

Alex Easton: You picked a bad day to ask me that because yesterday I was putting out the budgets and allocations of resources to departments. We live in the real world of finite budgets and staff have to understand that. You asked about resources for doing digital work and moving into the media; one of the barriers is that those tend to be costly activities.

Brian Cooklin: The major difficulty is that schools are often able to embark on the projects because there is a pot of money available for which they can bid. For example, last night in my school was the screening—or the premiere as they called it—of a screen school production in which a group of pupils was involved. It was very professional and there was a DVD version and so on. However, only those 20 or 30 pupils will have that experience because there was a special fund available. How do we give that opportunity to other children who want to do the same? The funding is not there. Funding is marvellous and we welcome such seed funding because it introduces children to particular experiences. However, it is not sustainable in the current budgetary situation.

Alex Easton: To reinforce that, if anyone comes to me with a new initiative, the one word that I put to them is "sustainability".

Mr Ingram: I come back to the questions that we were asking about the articulation between schools and universities and the degree to which there is co-ordination on the curriculum between the two sets of institutions. It was suggested that head teachers might have some comment to make on that.

Alex Easton: The brutal answer is that there is almost none, although Brian Cooklin might correct me. Universities are a law unto themselves. Sometimes they have to change to respond to the market. For example, at one time someone would have needed Latin to become a doctor, but bright youngsters do not do Latin, so the universities had to drop that requirement in response to the market.

One of the worrying things that is happening in England—I hope that it does not come to Scotland—is that schools have been hoist by their own success. So many youngsters are now getting A levels and want to do law or medicine that it appears that the standards have dropped—not that the youngsters are working harder and the

schools are doing better—and universities are beginning to impose their own entrance exams.

I serve on the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service standing committee and I heard something last week that worried me. The University of Oxford is now holding an entrance exam for history. Medicine and law are not school subjects but, for the first time in a school-delivered subject, universities are imposing their own entrance exams. Youngsters are going to have to sit a range of extra exams. The universities are also trying to find some sieve that they think will separate the sheep from the goats. I think that liaison between universities and schools on the curriculum is almost non-existent, but Brian Cooklin may say that I am being unfair.

11:45

Brian Cooklin: No, I think that you are being brutally honest. It is a difficult situation. We have made considerable progress in overcoming what I would call the traditional sectoral jealousies. Let us be frank about the fact that the onus was always on the next stage, with primary teachers saying, "I'm passing them on to secondary and you've ruined them," and secondary teachers saying, "Well, you haven't prepared them properly and now we're handing them on to colleges and universities." A lot of those attitudes have been addressed, but at the interface between school and university the connections are not so good as those between school and FE or between primary and secondary.

It is very much a question of liaison being demand driven. The kind of developments that have been made in the UCAS tariff and in the Scottish credit and qualifications framework will make a difference over time, but there is no meeting of minds or understanding of where each side is coming from. I am trying to be as understanding as possible, but we do not really know what the problem is from the university side, because all that we will see are statements such as, "Well, they may have the highers, but they can't write an essay, talk in public or do X, Y and Z." I would answer back, "The fact that someone has five highers doesn't make them a good doctor, because the skills of talking to people and communicating are not necessarily measured by that." We could easily become involved in trading insults, which would not be helpful.

We must recognise that the mechanisms that we are trying to develop should be accepted and should have credibility. That is the key and that is what is driving everything. Our system is very much assessment and exam driven and the notion is that someone has to get a piece of paper with certain subjects on it in order to gain entry to university. I have to ask why. Of course exams are important and significant, but that notion drives all the problems that were highlighted earlier, when people were asking why we have so much content in subjects. Content has to be covered so that the student can reach a certain level before going on, and they have to build on that content and on their knowledge of it in order to be at a stage where they can cope with the knowledge that they will have to absorb at university, and so it goes on. There are some fundamental questions that need to be asked.

Mr Ingram: If we really want to develop a culture of lifelong learning, that is one barrier that needs to be tackled. Do you see a role for ministerial or parliamentary intervention? When Rhona Brankin, Ken Macintosh and I were members of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee in the previous session of Parliament, we discussed the SCQF and saw it as a way forward. Do you have any pointers for us?

Alex Easton: I do not know how you take on a papal bull, which is how the University of Glasgow was established. In other words, I do not know what authority the Executive would have over universities. That is a major issue and I dare say that it would take a Philadelphia lawyer to crack it. However, universities are having to be more flexible. More than a third of people going to university now are over 25. That is great; that is the way that it should be. Universities are therefore having to show more flexibility, but they just do not show the same flexibility with my pupils leaving school and I care passionately about them.

Mr Macintosh: I return to age-and-stage flexibility, which you mentioned at the beginning. I welcome your comments about your reasons for supporting the relaxation of the rules and I am sure that most people would welcome their children being challenged and not held back unnecessarily. On the down side, is there any information or evidence about how that could undermine the comprehensive principle? The very last thing that Michael O'Neill said was that he could see how schools in Lenzie and Bearsden would grasp the new approach, while other schools in more deprived and disadvantaged areas would not necessarily do so. I can envisage cases in which age-and-stage relaxation becomes another thing that divides our schools and divides pupils within schools because of their backgrounds. If someone goes to a high-achieving school in a nice area, they will be stretched and challenged. However, someone of equal ability who attends a disadvantaged school does not have the opportunity of age-and-stage flexibility. Are you considering areas such as that? How do you get round those sorts of problems?

Alex Easton: I would like to challenge that one head on, using my school as an example. I have

some fabulous youngsters from Langlees and Camelon, which are the most deprived areas in Falkirk. We must not label or undervalue youngsters from such areas. The flexibility that we are talking about is not the flexibility for a whole school to go to a different model. In an ideal Scottish comprehensive, flexibility will meet the needs of every individual. The aim is not to meet one pupil's needs at the expense of another's. I have talked about a high priority to reduce the attainment gap, but the idea is to raise the attainment of everybody. I would be unhappy if a bright youngster did not do as well in my school as he did paying £8,000 for private-school fees. It is about the value that we add to that youngster. I would argue that we want to add value to all youngsters. Hopefully, the tension that you mentioned does not exist. It requires sensitive management. Do you have a different spin, Brian?

Brian Cooklin: The key word is appropriateness. The advantage of age-and-stage relaxation, together with the curriculum flexibility that we were discussing earlier, is that it allows schools to offer appropriate curricula for the different abilities within the school. I am fortunate in that I am head of one of those ideal comprehensives that Alex Easton referred to. On any measurement, I have about a third at the top, a third in the middle and a third at the bottom. As a result—because it is convenient to have that kind of breakdown in one establishment—we have been used widely for research purposes. What is on offer is on offer for all children. We should not lose sight of that; I do not think that schools do. I do not think that there will be a tendency for any schools to go down the path of saying that they will offer a reduced curriculum or that, because they are situated in a poor area, nobody expects very much so they do not have to try very hard. You will not find any support for that and I cannot think of any head teacher who would want to go down that route.

We have to be careful about the question of appropriateness and balance. If a school decides to restrict its curriculum—and I have had experience of that, where a child has moved to our school because they were unable to take five highers in the school they were in, which had made a conscious decision to move its curriculum in a much more vocational direction—it takes away opportunities for the very able and bright. In essence, it is about balance and appropriateness and making use of the flexibility in a cogent, intelligent way, which is suitable for the groups of children one has in one's school.

Alex Easton: Schools use consortia models nowadays. No school in my area wants to teach advanced higher French, because it will attract one or two youngsters and it will be costly in teachers. We all want a school to offer it, though, because we all have one or two pupils who want to take it. There are negotiations. A way round it for schools whose catchment area is skewed towards more challenging areas but which want to cope for very able youngsters can be through consortia arrangements. Working collaboratively like that, a group of schools can offer as wide a choice of high academic subjects as one individual school in, say, Bearsden.

Mr Macintosh: I am encouraged to hear what you are saying. It must be too early for information about how it is working in practice. There is, however, a fear that the schools with high academic achievement push, or accelerate, children into taking exams early, and that exactly the opposite kind of flexibility takes place in other schools, where children are discouraged from taking exams early. Both types of school have age-and-stage relaxation, but it is used in different ways and people are divided.

On a practical note, when age-and-stage flexibility is working in practice, does it involve a whole class or groups of individuals within a class? Do the children involved go into the class in the year above them, or do you take a whole year group? Will you give me an example of how age-and-stage flexibility is working in practice?

Alex Easton: At the moment, it could involve a whole class. If the school sets classes at S2 level, the top sets in English and maths might embark straight away on standard grades. Schools can also have mixed-level classes. Our school has classes in which some pupils are doing standard grades and others are doing NQs. There can be great flexibility in schools in that regard.

Whereas at the moment, at the senior end of the school, it is possible to have fifth and sixth-year pupils in the one class, in the model that I have described and which will unfold—I think that Keith Grammar School and Dalziel High School are following it—I can envisage fourth, fifth and sixth-year pupils being in one class. They could start their highers in fourth year or pick them up at a later stage. Speaking as a headmaster, I think that the model that I have outlined offers financial efficiency too, as it allows us to have more valid class sizes. As I said, if the model that I predict comes into being, fourth, fifth and sixth-year youngsters could be in the one class. There is no reason why that should not be the case.

Ms Alexander: The next item on the committee's agenda is a discussion about what has emerged from our discussions on the school curriculum. Without exception, the evidence that we have heard to date has been that curriculum flexibility is a good thing—everybody has said that. Therefore, our saying that curriculum flexibility is a good thing does not really add to the sum of human knowledge. That said, almost everybody

also said that progress on curriculum flexibility has been too slow. I would like your view on what we have heard so far. The Executive is saying that it produced guidelines five years ago and that if schools have used them only for age-and-stage flexibility, it is not the fault of the Executive.

At our last meeting, Learning and Teaching Scotland said that schools and local authorities are taking a "cautious" approach to curriculum flexibility. We heard from North Lanarkshire Council today that it is deeply dishonest to insist that pupils continue to study the full modal range of subjects, as that offers no real flexibility to schools in tackling specific issues and providing a meaningful school experience.

We have also heard that it is very difficult for an individual school or local authority to offer curriculum flexibility because a child might have to move schools and the same approach might not be taken in the school to which they move. We also heard last week that another problem with curriculum flexibility is that parents do not like it because they see it as a dumbing down of the curriculum. Today, we heard that it is not happening because universities continue to want exams.

If we are saying not only that curriculum flexibility is a good idea but that we want progress to be made on it, what is the most important blockage that needs to be removed in order to free things up?

Alex Easton: Crude targets are an enormous barrier given that the inspectorate judges schools by them. If the definition of SCQF levels could be broadened, it could pave the way for such things as the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network qualifications and the Scottish skill force pilot in North Lanarkshire. I am also thinking of the Glasgow schools vocational training programme in construction in which some fantastic work is being done with youngsters from Castlemilk and so forth.

I do not think that we should be as radical as the Welsh have been and chuck targets in the bin, but we should broaden our definition of target levels in schools. That is the single thing that would be of enormous help. It would mean that schools would not get hammered if the inspectorate were to come and find that a teacher is doing something different for the challenging youngsters in their class—of whom there are many—who need an alternative approach. The inspectorate could hammer a school because the percentage of pupils who are getting five credits is lower than it is in, let us say, Mearns Castle High School or Gryffe High School.

As Brian Cooklin said, the fact is that, after a lot of debate, we decided not to go for the most radical option. We do not want total anarchy for schools to do their own thing. I should be able to justify to HMIE everything that I do, all of which should be evaluated. I should be able to justify whether it has made a difference and say what the difference is in attendance figures and whether there has been a reduction in the number of disengaged youngsters. A whole raft of broad indicators is involved.

Ms Alexander: I do not mean this to sound like an aside, but in our last evidence-taking session we heard a lot about the new inspectorate regime. Do I take it that you feel that the inspectorate regime has got to the place where it needs to be a driver of curriculum flexibility instead of an inhibitor?

Alex Easton: It is early days. We think that the new proportionate model is the best that there has been for ages. It has enormous potential. It may be that I am getting too long in the tooth, but I think that the jury is out on this one. I will wait and see what happens. When we appeared before the committee previously, we talked about engagement with the new inspection model, which offers the potential to be a far better model. If Wendy Alexander were to ask me the same question in two years' time, by which time I will have trawled to find the comments of colleagues from across Scotland, I would give her a more valid answer.

12:00

Brian Cooklin: You asked also about barriers. The timing of the committee's investigation means that it is a little bit early for it to know how curriculum flexibility is progressing, but there is no doubt that it is gathering pace. The issuing of the guidelines five years ago was the first relaxation of the corset. People were wary of that, because they had been working in an environment where they were strictly watched. There were guidelines, but they were not treated as such. HMIE would come into schools and say, "Why aren't you doing this, and why isn't it all exactly like that, and why isn't it in the eight modal columns?" With that relaxation, people dipped their toes in the water. In educational terms, many people are reticent about making radical moves until they see whether they work elsewhere. There is a tendency to say, "I don't want to be first. I'll watch and see whether this works."

Another barrier is teaching attitudes. There are people who say, "I don't think this is the right move. This is not what I was trained for; I don't think the children are ready for it and I'm opposed to it root and branch." Fixed positions are sometimes taken, but when we consult parents and pupils—we always consult in schools—on potential changes, we find that there is strong

support for the opportunities, provided that they are properly organised and run, and that they are to the advantage of all concerned.

Alex Easton: You should not be surprised, Wendy, that the approach seems to be relatively measured. We had a top-down dominated, strict model in Scotland, and the inspector would fry us alive if we deviated from it in any way. As I said, it is not as if Scottish education has been a nightmare—it is not like you have the ruins of Carthage in front of you on which to build a city—so it is not surprising that people did not charge ahead when doing so could produce negative outcomes. However, we are now more confident. We now do things that are against council policy and justify them. We would have been on a discipline charge for that 10 years ago.

Brian Cooklin: We are moving people out of the comfort zone. When people know that there is regulation and know what is expected of them and what they have to deliver, they are safe, but safety is not delivering for all the children whom they have in front of them. To break out of that situation, people have to be disturbed from their comfort zones at all levels.

The Convener: I have one final issue. I am conscious that you are both secondary teachers. On language teaching in school, I visited the Gaelic school and saw the immersion teaching that starts in primary 1. Are we getting languages right, by starting them in primary 6 and 7 and taking them into secondary? Are we interesting children in languages? Leaving Gaelic aside, is there merit in having immersion teaching in modern European languages at a much earlier stage in primary? Should we be making radical changes? Does the Headteachers Association of Scotland have a view, or can you come back to us on it at some point?

Alex Easton: The greatest success stories in Europe are in Denmark, Germany and so on, where children start learning English not at the age of nine or 10, but much earlier. We suffer from the fact that satellite TV, the internet and America speak English, so it is hard to get a youngster in the middle-west of Scotland to see the advantage in taking languages. We understand the logic behind the Michael Forsyth-driven compulsion—which was that we are Europeans—but it has not been a wise move. We should engage youngsters in languages earlier.

In my school, I instantly latched on to the freedom that Jack McConnell gave me and the subject took its place in the marketplace. The numbers of those doing languages plummeted far too much, but that produced a rethink. We have looked at what we are doing in S1 and S2 and asked how, for example, posters and information and communications technology can be used. We have had careers staff in to try to sell languages. In a way, it has been refreshing that things have moved on. With modern youngsters—and more power to their elbow—compulsion, by and large, does not work, because they have to see the merit and worth of things.

Brian Cooklin: If we want to improve the uptake and, more important, the mastery of languages, the younger people are, the better—there is no doubt about that and all the evidence shows it. In practical terms, we have to be careful. The primary curriculum is extremely crowded. My primary colleagues will say that it is overloaded. It is unrealistic to say that with 27 hours of training, people are modern language teachers in primary. That training cannot provide much more than a taster.

In my school, we offer a choice of French or German. We have a good working relationship and partnership with teachers who teach French or German in primary school. We connect well. However, in my practical experience, when I taught briefly in Germany, I was impressed by the command of English throughout at a much younger age. Then again, every teacher in the Land that I was in had to teach English, in the same way that we are looking at a Gaelic secondary school where the Gaelic medium will be used for every subject. That is how to achieve the result, but it would need to be resourced. The primary curriculum would also have to be relaxed, because far too much is expected to be covered.

The Convener: That is a general issue. Thank you for your evidence, which was interesting. We are grateful for your participation.

We will take a five-minute break before we deal with the final two items.

12:06

Meeting suspended.

12:15

On resuming—

The Convener: Item 4 is consideration of the emerging themes in the evidence that we have taken in our school curriculum inquiry. The inquiry is not time limited. During the break, the point was made that we have heard from secondary schools, but there has been less emphasis on the primary sector. Can I have members' views about the themes that are emerging and the further evidence that we should take?

Mr Macintosh: What structure do you think our inquiry will have? I thought that the idea was that we were outlining preliminary evidence and that

we would think about the nature and structure of our inquiry as we did so.

The Convener: That is right. We are awaiting the ministerial announcement and, clearly, what we do will have to be done in that context. I am not clear about whether the Executive will concentrate on particular parts of the curriculum or on other issues.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Would it help if the clerks were able to do a précis of the key points that have been mentioned so far in evidence? If we do not have such a précis, our discussion might not be sufficiently focused.

The Convener: Part of the issue is whether we want to take further evidence at a later point. We have some school visits coming up. Perhaps we should talk about this issue after we have gone on them.

Ms Alexander: Our response depends on the timetable for the curricular review group publishing its report and the subsequent timetable for the ministerial response. Having a timetable from the clerks would help us to decide whether we will have an opportunity to hear evidence about what the curricular review has said and whether we want to make an intervention in advance of the ministerial response.

The Convener: I do not think that we have any information on that.

Martin Verity (Clerk): Not in any detail.

Mr Macintosh: The people who gave evidence last week suggested—

Ms Alexander: Yes, I thought that they indicated that they expected the curricular review group to publish its report in August.

Mr Macintosh: I am not in a rush to take any more evidence until we have a structure for our inquiry. However, we have not considered the dominance of exams in the system, although everybody has touched on that. From what Mr Baughan and Keir Bloomer were saying last week, it does not sound as if the review will focus on that area. We might need to think about how we approach it. Perhaps we should take evidence from the universities and others.

Rhona Brankin: The issue about universities is important. A central issue relates to quality assurance, the extent to which the quality assurance regime determines what happens in schools and the possibility of developing a more flexible approach to that.

The notion of individualised, tailor-made curricula is also important. There are issues about the structures and mechanisms that secondary schools will need if they are to develop individualised curricula for their pupils. How schools will tackle that is an issue, because they will need to have a handle on the progress of each youngster. In comparison with primary schools, secondary schools have had a big problem with that.

Also, we have not considered the curriculum in nursery and primary schools.

I am sketchy about the details of the curricular review and whether it will receive input from parents. Will organisations such as parents' groups be able to make submissions? Have they done so already and, if so, can we see those submissions, or will the review make a call for evidence? Where are we on that?

The Convener: I do not know either, but I had assumed that that would not be the case.

Ms Byrne: To be honest, I think that we need more information before we can make progress. We have not heard from the teachers' unions or, as Rhona Brankin mentioned, from primary schools or parents.

The Convener: Perhaps we can finalise things at our away day, by which time we should have more information. Clearly, it would be helpful to circulate a paper on timescales and another paper giving a précis of the stuff that we have heard. If we need to do other things to get evidence early after the recess, perhaps we can come to some provisional views. Other than that, I think that we should leave such matters for the away day.

Rhona Brankin: Another area that I think is important is how flexibility has been introduced in different ways through different funding streams.

Will you remind me what visits have been arranged? Some of the examples that were mentioned today sounded interesting.

The Convener: Three visits have been arranged to schools in North Lanarkshire, Edinburgh and Dunbar next week.

Rhona Brankin: Why will we visit those schools in particular?

The Convener: The schools have various strengths in different things. As I recall, one of them has quite good linkages with further education. HMIE or whoever suggested to us that the schools had particular strengths.

Rhona Brankin: Are they primary or secondary schools?

The Convener: They are all secondary schools.

Rhona Brankin: Will we not visit any primary schools?

The Convener: That would need to be a follow-up visit. We have only next week and the following week before the summer recess and we still need

to finalise the report of our inquiry into child protection. There is no scope to do anything further before the recess, so we would need to review that issue later.

Dr Murray: Although curriculum flexibility sounds like a topic for inquiry, I think that our remit needs to be more focused if we are to do anything useful. We could broaden the inquiry to include the entire curriculum, which would involve considering how the curriculum works from three through to 18. Following that track would be one way of interacting with the Executive's review. Alternatively, we could usefully focus on assessment and the expectations that universities and employers have. That would involve considering whether our assessment model delivers young people with the sorts of skills that will fulfil them and provide them with successful employment. However, I do not think that we can do both those things.

The Convener: We certainly need to narrow things down. There are no two ways about that.

Dr Murray: We first need to focus on what we want to achieve. Thereafter, we can consider from which of the various practitioners we will take evidence.

The Convener: I am moderately attracted to Ken Macintosh's idea of focusing on exams. An awful lot turns on how we examine and assess students. That is an important driver, although it is not by any means the only one.

Are people broadly content that we arrange a précis of the evidence to date so that we have a summation of all that we have heard, which we can then deal with at the away day? If we need to get things fixed up to invite people to give evidence after the summer recess, we will deal with that administratively. In the meantime, perhaps people could give some thought to where we want to go for our away day and what we want to do. I think that the date for it has not yet been fixed.

Martin Verity: The away day will be on either 2 September or 3 September.

Dr Murray: This issue also came up in the Finance Committee. Members are expected to attend various training sessions in Holyrood during that week.

The Convener: The summer recess as such does not formally finish until the following week.

Dr Murray: We have been circulated with various programmes of training for that week. We are supposed to be inducted according to the floor on which our office is located so that we can discover where the fire escapes are and so on.

The Convener: We will just have to fit in with that, but the clerks will do their best to fix the times.

Mr Macintosh: What will we do at the away day? What is it for?

The Convener: I cannot remember the details of it, but clearly it is to do with the on-going work programme and things of that kind. We are not having an overnight stay this time, just an afternoon session. What did we look at last time?

Martin Verity: Basically, it was a look forward. The main purpose of the away day is to identify the main themes of work that will be done in the forthcoming year, although a lot of that is already partly determined by legislation. Another area that could be addressed is the way in which the committee works. That has been discussed with the convener but not with all committee members.

The Convener: We are encouraged to have away days. Clearly, I do not want to have an away day for no purpose, but there is merit in having some sort of forward look. Members keep raising issues about the work programme along the line, and I know that our timetable is adjustable as events take place, but it is worth while to take a slightly more strategic look at things before the next parliamentary year begins.

Mr Macintosh: Is the proposed date 2 September or 3 September?

The Convener: We can finalise that according to members' arrangements.

Ms Alexander: I suggest that we have a paper about the extent to which our work programme is already set. We know what bills are coming, we have already committed ourselves to doing some work on pre-five education and we are already half way through a piece of work on the curriculum. I am reluctant to devote a whole day to discussing a work programme that I suspect is probably 80 per cent set for the year. I am not unhappy about having a discussion about the way in which we work, but I am not sure that we need a whole away day to discuss a work programme that—

The Convener: We are not having a whole away day; we are having a half away day.

Ms Alexander: Okay. That is fine, but it would be helpful to have a paper in advance about what percentage of our time is likely to be up for discretion, because I feel that we have rather locked ourselves into commitments for perhaps 80 per cent of our time that are now unmoveable.

The Convener: At our last meeting before the recess, we should have a discussion about what the away day will be, just to formalise matters. There is not much else on the agenda other than finalising our report.

12:27

Meeting continued in private until 12:46.

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ISBN 0 338 000003 ISSN 1467-0178